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ABSTRACT

Sexism in math books for juveniles has created much discussion and controversy. In particular, sexist examples in arithmetic books suggest that math is a "masculine" subject and foster traditional, male-dominated sex roles. Just as with math texts, many adults read the words of counting books, and from these words alone, draw their conclusions as to whether or not sexism is apparent. They may neglect the illustrations, which most interest young children. Many modern counting books fall into three broad categories: (1) traditionally sexist, male-oriented books; (2) books that avoid the topic of sex roles; and (3) books that face the idea of female/male stereotypes in some way. The first category, traditionally sexist books, contains those books that use overtly sexist illustrations, historical illustrations of traditional roles, and illustrations of asexual characters in traditionally male roles. Such books may also deal with some other problem (such as racism) and present traditional sex roles. The second category, books that avoid sex roles, use nonsense drawings, totally asexual animals, or realistic objects in their illustrations. One example in the relatively small third category of books that deal positively with the issue of sex roles involves a boy who trades his toys for his sister's doll. When selecting counting books, adults need to pay attention to the content of the illustrations as well as noting whether they present clear pictures of items to be counted. (CB)

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A Study of Sexism in the Illustrations of Counting Books

Lynn Westbrook

Sexism in math books for juveniles creates much discussion and controversy. Educators notice that when John adds two groups of trucks while Jane adds two groups of dolls children absorb more than the lesson in addition. Children often absorb new, and possibly damaging, information about their own sexual self-images. Many adults contend that this type of sexist example in arithmetic books harms children for two reasons. First, such texts tend to suggest the idea that math is for boys, a masculine subject. Second, they foster the traditional, male dominated sex roles. These ideas continue to trigger discussions among parents, librarians, and teachers.

One offshoot of these sexist math books rarely receives the attention it deserves. Counting books act as the foundation on which children build their ideas of math. This vast array of simple books gives children their first emotional response to a subject they will face daily for many years to come. Sexism in these books acts as a subliminal message which may well be reinforced as children move into the more advanced books.

Just as with actual math texts, many adults read the words of counting books and, from these words alone, draw their conclusions on sexism. Even adults who carefully screen the text, however, may neglect the illustrations which most interest small children. It might be useful, therefore, to take a look at sexism in the illustrations of counting books, particularly those pictures least likely to be scrutinized, that is the illustrations not dictated by the text.

Many modern counting books tend to fall into three broad categories.

Group one consists of the traditionally sexist, male oriented books. Many of the so called "grandmother" books fit into this area with their pictures of girls petting kittens while boys drive trucks.

Category two, containing most of our modern counting books, consists of illustrations which totally avoid the topic of sex roles. By using fantasy figures, animals, or asexual objects the illustrators keep from adding to the sexism without doing anything to help solve it.

The third category contains a small number of volumes which face the idea of female/male stereotypes in some form. Generally, in this third category, the intention is to deal with sex roles in some positive manner.

Many adults might assume that the first category of sexism contains few modern counting books. Yet Brenda Seymour's First Counting, although published in 1969, exudes sexism from the frontispiece of a little boy playing with an abacus under an arch of trains and soldiers to the little girls putting their seven dolls to bed. Anytime a boy enjoys something "soft", such as feeding birds, the presence of the two older girls suggests that he is yet a baby. Reinforcement of the mothering role appears often in the pictures of older girls holding protectively to the hands of a younger boy. The contrast between drawings of boys counting owls in a wild field and girls counting lacy dolls may seem so sharp that no careful adult would purchase the book. Yet the text is clear and the items so easy to count that many adults may look no deeper.

Another book in this first category, more likely to be overlooked than

First Counting, touches on a different aspect of sex roles. Anno's Counting Book uses roughly historical illustrations in which Mitsumasa Anno pictures the progression of numbers in the growth of a town. Many adults will accept the most sexist wolves in historical clothing because "everybody knows" that those roles are 100 years out of date. Children, however, may not see much difference between a woman in a long dress looking after babies and a woman in pants doing the same thing. Anno's nineteenth century farming women usually watch the children while their men build railroads. Seldom recognized as sexist because of their distance in time, these lovely drawings continue to teach children their numbers.

A third form of the illustrations in category one utilizes a nebulous, subtle method. This type of book simply uses no men or women. Nicola Bayley's One Old Oxford Ox gives off the quiet nuance of masculinity to many people by using "male" animals involved in "male" activities. In style and action most of her animals "feel" male. Few parents would point to a drawing of a gun toting fox and ask, "What is she doing?"

Even the more asexual or neutral animals bear text-dictated titles which tend to shade them male. Various penguins or "fishermen" (text) add to their plentiful catches (illustration.) Badgers become "eminent Englishmen eagerly examining Europe." These objections, more text than illustration oriented, apply here because the pictures could have made it clear that the fishermen included several fisherwomen and so on.

The actions Bayley gives these animals adds to the masculinity as much as the suffix used above. Readers perceive her characters as male so long as they participate in the traditionally male activities of fishing, capturing

frogs, hunting, camping, and running a printing press.

Harriet Sherman's drawings of Eve Merriem's text in Project 1-2-3 exemplify the final type in this first category of sexist illustrations. In her effort to deal with the racism of all white children's books, Sherman neglected to avoid sexism in her pictures. In this book men handle every job outside of the family. Women accomplish only domestic chores, such as cooking and watching the children. The emphasis on one issue (such as racism) can cause other equally valid issues (such as sexism) to be ignored.

These examples of sexist illustrations generally come from one of the following four specific causes: 1) simple, overt sexism, 2) traditional roles disguised by historical distance, 3) the subtle, exclusive association of "male" with mathematics, and 4) the "problem" book in which sexism is ignored in the treatment of another issue.

In the second category, however, illustrators simply avoid the entire question of sexism, either intentionally or not, by using or combining the three general procedures of: 1) sheer nonsense drawings, 2) totally asexual animals, and 3) realistic objects (or animals) from photographs (or drawings).

By using sheer nonsense or fantasy figures, these illustrators create neutered beings for which "sex roles" are impossible. In Lynley Dodd's Nickle Nackle Tree, for example, the "squaking Scritch" and "lurking Yuk" birds remain unquestionably asexual. The text-dictated emotions or attitudes displayed by the birds in this book lean a little more toward the forceful than the weak but that is as close as Dodd gets to any nebulous underlining

of sexual roles. Frank Ashe's Little Devil's One, Two, Three also uses fantasy figures although in a more complex situation. His asexual devils leap into acrobatics and play with neutral objects such as ice cream cones, an umbrella, and candy. No one carries a gun or a doll. The fact that the characters are more realistic than Dodd's creatures and carry very realistic items makes the avoidance of sex roles a little trickier. Sylvia Selig's illustrations in Ten What? combine fantasy and realism to create surrealistic animal pictures. Few parents would question the sex of a fish floating in a tree or of an elephant with an alligator in its mouth. In this fantasy animal world any question of sex roles becomes a moot point.

While exciting fantasy figures abound in illustrations of this second category, the use of animals is also popular. Marc Brown's drawings in 1, 2, 3 are simply pleasant objects to be recognized and counted without any subliminal message. The huge gnus balance the tiny butterflies so that no veiled message tips the scales toward male or female. Even the expressions of the animals help maintain the neutrality by avoiding the "usual." For instance, Brown's alligators appear coy rather than cruel. Such expressions allow an adult to point out virtually any of his creatures and ask "What is she or he doing?" Helen Oxenbury's animals exude this same quality in Numbers of Things. Her scrappy cats and rather bewildered mice make interesting and asexual characters. Guilo Maestro's illustrations for Mirra Ginsburg's Kitten from One to Ten and Elaine Livermore's drawings in One to Ten, Count Again also contain uniquely appealing creatures. This pattern of creating such sexless animals as Maestro's kitten and Livermore's camels is an efficient method of avoiding the entire question of sex roles in counting book illustrations.

Perhaps, however, the most effective way to avoid the issue is to use photographs (or realistic drawings) of actual objects. This method is so simple and straightforward that two examples should complete the explanation. Mottke Weisman's photographs, for Robert Allen's text in Numbers: A First Counting Book, avoid any real, consistent association with male or female. Although the specific items to be counted are dictated by the text, Weisman has kept the photographs absolutely neutral by refusing to add any background. No little girls hold the dolls while intent little boys play with the cars. John Reiss's drawings for his book, Numbers, also consist of clearly recognizable objects. His slightly stylized pictures are still clear and simple enough to be thought of as essentially realistic. Such objects as socks, radishes, and fingers are so honestly neutral that the subject of sex roles has no connection.

If, however, an adult wants the question of sexism to be involved in counting books, as it will be in later math texts, then only a few books are available. In Rosemary Well's Max's Toys: A Counting Book, for example, sex roles are vital to the plot. The special style of the illustrations help to make the book more of a story than a lesson, in either counting or sexism. When Max (a bunny) wants his sister's (Ruby's) doll (Emily) he eventually trades all his soldiers, trucks, cars, trains, balloons, and animals to get Emily. Well's drawings give every item in the book a light cheerful touch. As lovely as princess Emily is, for example, she is no Victorian, lacy dolly. Her self-confidence makes her a good toy for either bunny. Max's sturdy soldiers are not about to reenact the Charge of the Light Brigade. They are

versatile, fun, and enjoyable but never macho. Ruby looks delighted with her new toys, not triumphant. Max certainly looks overjoyed with Emily, not sweetly sensitive. The style of these drawings reinforces the author's textual message that toys can be enjoyed by anyone, not just "liberated" girls or "sensitive" boys.

The books discussed herein tend to fall into three broad categories, that is sexist, asexual, or issue-involved. Most adults searching for a good counting book think along the lines of clear illustrations and an accurate number of items to be counted. Since adults tend to read the text and show the pictures, they often need to take a particularly good look at these illustrations which are, after all, the most important part of the book for many children.

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